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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000465

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TAGS: PREL TU IS

SUBJECT: TURKEY ADVOCATES DIALOGUE, UNDERSTANDING IN MIDST
OF GAZA STRIFE

REF: ANKARA 180

Classified By: PolCouns Janice G. Weiner for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In the months following Annapolis, Turkey has adopted an increasingly responsible and constructive tone in its engagement with Israel and Palestine. The Justice and Development Party (AKP)-led government has reduced its casual use of anti-Israel rhetoric and added a more conciliatory aspect to its public statements. Throughout the most recent crisis in Gaza, the GOT acknowledged the counterproductive nature of both sides' actions (not just Israel's), heartily encouraged a return to the peace talks, and condemned Hamas' actions as terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians. PM Erdogan's apparent change of heart is at least in part attributable to increased engagement with the GOT on MEPP issues and implicit acknowledgment of Turkey's constructive regional role such engagement represents. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The AKP-led government's casual use of anti-Israeli rhetoric has routinely placed a strain on the traditionally warm Turkey-Israel bilateral relationship. None more so than PM Erdogan's politically-driven January assertion to his party's parliamentary group that no Israeli civilians have died from Gaza rocket attacks (reftel). Although much softer in its tone, the MFA's concurrent statement placed the onus for cessation of hostilities on Israel without acknowledging Palestinian provocation. Following the most recent events in Gaza, however, the GOT (both Erdogan and the MFA) has adopted a considerably more neutral and constructive stance, appealing to both sides to stop the violence and resume peace negotiations.

Taking the High Road

¶3. (SBU) Over the last two weeks, the GOT has repeatedly called for a resolution to the Israel/Palestine crisis through the "establishment of dialogue and mutual understanding." On February 25, the MFA issued a statement characterizing Iranian President Ahmadinejad's anti-Israel rhetoric as "unconstructive" and "regrettable," and encouraged all regional countries to refrain from "conduct that is not compatible with the due respect that has to be shown by all members of the international community." The MFA released a second statement, February 29, expressing concern over the "spiral of violence" that has escalated as a result of Gaza missile attacks and the Israeli Defense Forces' "overreaction" - acknowledging the existence of

events that precipitated an Israeli response. On March 7, the MFA denounced the March 6 Mercaz Harav seminary shooting as a terrorist act against innocent civilians and implored all sides to "continue the progress started in Annapolis."

¶4. (C) MFA Israel/Palestine desk officer Murat Omeroglu told us Erdogan telephoned both Israeli PM Olmert and PA President Abbas on March 2 to discuss the ongoing conflict. Erdogan urged the two leaders to return to the negotiating table and not lose the momentum created by Annapolis. PM Erdogan has also adopted a more moderate stance in his public statements.

In a March 4 speech to his party parliamentary group (the forum for some of his most egregious anti-Israel comments in the past), Erdogan criticized Israel's disproportionate use of force, and also encouraged both sides to act responsibly and with common sense. "What matters now," stated Erdogan, "is preventing the resumption of conflict...violence is of no use to anyone." One day earlier, Deputy Prime Minister and Government Spokesman Cemil Cicek condemned Israeli actions and then called upon Hamas to suspend rocket attacks on Israel.

One Man's Terrorist

¶5. (C) During a March 4 press conference, Israeli Ambassador to Turkey Gabby Levi complemented Turkey's "balanced" statements. Levi also underscored the need for the GOT to view Hamas as a terrorist threat akin to the PKK. Israel's response to Hamas rocket attacks, he argued, was no different in purpose than Turkey's recent cross border operation into Northern Iraq. Israeli DCM Sharon Bar-li Sa,ar told us that the change in Erdogan's tone greatly reflects Israeli Defense

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Minister Barak's efforts to engage the GOT on this issue during his February 12-13 visit. During his meetings, Barak outlined in detail the imminent threat posed by terrorist missiles to Israeli civilians and GOI plans to minimize Palestinian civilian casualties when responding.

Sustainable Momentum

¶6. (C) Comment: Despite overwhelming Turkish opinion against Israel's use of collective punishment and the Islamist media's relentless pot stirring, the AKP-led GOT has taken the high road and focused more (although not exclusively) on resolving the conflict than scoring easy points with its domestic audience. Erdogan appears to have internalized Barak's concerns and altered his message to appropriately reflect his administration's commitment to playing a constructive role in the Middle East peace process. The muted rhetoric may also be a function of President Gul's plan to travel to Israel in the coming months. Regardless, the GOT has thrown its political weight behind Annapolis and, for the first time, broadly acknowledged Hamas' provocation of Israel. In order to sustain support for this approach, PM Erdogan must be able to demonstrate to his constituency the value such constructive neutrality can have, both through increased international engagement and recognition of Turkey's contributions. Turkey's inclusion in the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee on assistance to the Palestinians is one example the GOT has highlighted. End Comment.

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